

German Socialism and the ‘woman question’

Janine Booth, Workers’ Liberty, 21 October, 2005

The article below was published on the Trotskyist web site “Workers’ Liberty”. It has been shortened. Its principal value is that it outlines a narrative context from the time of Karl Marx, who was still alive when August Bebel published his book “Women and Socialism” in 1879, through to the era of Rosa Luxemburg, and Lenin. Frederick Engels died on 5 August 1895.

The link to the original article is given at the end.

During the nineteenth century, the emerging workers’ movement began to develop its policy on the “woman question”. The early, “utopian” socialists argued strongly for women’s liberation. Ferdinand Lassalle led the “proletarian anti-feminists”, opposing votes for women and urging male workers to strike against women’s entry into industrial labour. **Marx** and **Engels** opposed Lassalle, arguing that women’s work was a step forward, and a precondition for liberation.

In 1875, the Socialist Labour Party of Germany — later to become the Social Democratic Party (SPD) — was formed. In 1879, imprisoned SPD leader **August Bebel** published *Women and Socialism*. The book had an enormous impact, awakening both women and men to the potential of working-class women. In 1890, Germany’s Anti-Socialist Law was repealed.

The stage was now set for the appearance of a landmark working-class women’s movement, led by **Clara Zetkin**. It was to mobilise thousands of women, and make a great contribution to socialist theory and practice on women’s liberation. How did they do that? Janine Booth tells the history:

German socialist women placed strong emphasis on education. They set up education clubs for women and girls (Frauen- and Madchen-Bildungsverein), which held meetings, hosted lectures, published articles and pamphlets, and gathered information on women’s working conditions. Each club had between 50 and 250 members, who paid a small monthly fee.

By 1905, 3,000 women were members of education clubs. From 1908, women’s reading evenings (Leseabende) operated in around 150 localities, by 1910 involving

4,000 women. A women's library (Frauenbibliothek) collected speeches, pamphlets and reprints of newspaper articles.

Most of the leading socialist women — Luise Zietz, Clara Zetkin, Ottilie Baader — were involved in educating other women. And most of the socialist movement's female public speakers had gained their knowledge, understanding and confidence through socialist women's education.

Agitation commissions

In August 1889, a meeting in Berlin founded a women's agitation commission (Frauen-Agitationkommission) to co-ordinate political work amongst women. Commissions were formed in other towns, and set about recruiting women to the SPD and the trade unions, and convincing socialist men to support the women's cause. They ran speaker tours, produced literature, and campaigned on issues of interest to working women.

The membership of each commission was limited to three, in an attempt to avoid state persecution. However, after persistent state harassment, the agitation commissions were banned in 1895.

The law banned only political combination, not the activities of individuals. So the socialist women passed the commissions' role to individual women organisers, Vertrauenspersonen. Their work was co-ordinated by a Zentralvertrauensperson — Ottilie Gerndt from 1895; Ottilie Baader from 1899. In 1900, the Party voted to include the women organisers in its formal structures, and from 1904, paid the central organiser a wage. By 1907, there were 407 women organisers.

Continuing industrialisation in Germany meant that by 1892 there were six million women in the workforce. Only 5,000, though, were members of the free trade unions. In 1894, the SPD produced a plan for a unionisation drive among working women, including appointing women to union positions, and special lectures for working women. Within two years, women's union membership had risen to more than 12,000.

In 1896, 10,000 garment workers held a major strike, centred in Berlin. Their demands included: fixed wage scales; prompt delivery of materials and collection of finished products; weekly payment of wages; the establishment of arbitration boards; and, most importantly, replacing homeworking with factory-like workshops (Betriebwerkstätten). The socialist women supported the strike by monitoring working conditions; holding mass meetings in Berlin; collecting money for the strike fund; and providing extensive coverage in **Die Gleichheit**.

From the early 1890s, leading socialist women had put forward the idea of socialist women's congresses. Beginning in 1893, women delegates held meetings at Party congresses. Twenty women attended the first official German socialist women's congress in 1900, and discussed extending the system of women organisers, agitation amongst women workers, and the attitude that socialist women should take to the bourgeois women's movement. Women's congresses were held every two years after that, and grew steadily: 74 women attended the event in 1908.

Publications

In 1890, the Party founded a women's newspaper, *Die Arbeiterin* (The Woman Worker) [edited by **Emma Ihrer**]. A year later, Clara Zetkin took over as editor. The paper's name was changed to **Die Gleichheit** (Equality), subtitled "for the interest of the woman worker". With Zetkin as editor for the next 25 years, it was by far the most important publication for German socialist women.

Die Gleichheit's aims were: to provide material for socialist women agitators; to heighten the political consciousness of working-class women; to intensify class struggle by sharpening class differences; and to act as a communication channel. It included a regular column, '**The Working Women's Movement**' (*Arbeiterinnen-Bewegung*), which was a noticeboard for meetings and events. The paper published reports on women's working conditions, and information on employment legislation, so that women could exercise their (limited) legal rights. There was supportive coverage of working women's strikes in Germany and elsewhere.

The paper's circulation grew rapidly: from 2,000 in 1891 to 11,000 in 1903/4 to 125,000 in 1914. The major cause of the big rise after 1904 was that the SPD (by then in control of *Die Gleichheit*) began distributing the paper free to socialist women and to the wives of SPD men. Good quality printed material was important, since women were less likely than men to go to meetings. *Die Gleichheit* played a central role in organising the socialist women's movement, in shaping its politics, and in developing the theoretical and practical work of German social democracy on the issue of working-class women's emancipation.

Suffrage campaigning

The Party campaigned for laws to protect women workers. In the 1880s and 1890s, it repeatedly called for the appointment of female factory inspectors. In 1895, the new draft Civil Code included a section on family law that legislated power within the family to the husband and discriminated against unmarried mothers and their

children. The SPD almost alone in the Reichstag opposed these new laws, whilst the socialist women mobilised actively against them.

The Party first advocated votes for women following its 1891 congress. In 1894, the SPD introduced a bill for women's suffrage to the Reichstag, and the socialist women held rallies to support the bill in Berlin and other major cities. The bill was defeated, but campaigning continued.

In 1898, Die Gleichheit began a regular column on women's suffrage. The women published several pamphlets and booklets, and articles in socialist papers. Clara Zetkin's pamphlet *The Question of Women's Suffrage*, published in 1907, was translated into Russian, English, Polish and French.

Outside Germany, socialist movements were not always so firm on this issue. Austrian socialists did not include women in their campaign to extend the franchise. British and Belgian socialist women welcomed votes for women with property as a positive, but inadequate, reform. Zetkin, though, argued that the vote for propertied women was not an extension of rights to women as women, but the extension of rights to the whole of the propertied classes, whether men or women. It was not a 'first step' for women, but a 'final step' for owners of property, strengthening their political power over workers.

Going international

The German women took the initiative in building international links between socialist women. At the International Socialist Congress in 1896 in London, women delegates met, and resolved to establish regular correspondence. But it was a further eleven years before the first official international congress of socialist women took place. It was held in 1907 in Stuttgart, convened by Clara Zetkin. 59 women from 15 countries attended.

The second international socialist women's congress, in 1910 in Copenhagen, resolved to hold an annual International Women's Day.

A successful strategy?

By 1914, the SPD had 174,754 women members — 16.1% of the Party total. The crucial factor in their success was that they devised and carried out a specific strategy for working-class women. This could not come just from theory, but needed a day-to-day involvement in the lives and struggles of working-class women.

There was another crucial factor: the ‘target audience’ should not be treated as a stage army. The movement involved women as activists, not as passive consumers. The debate over the nature of Die Gleichheit and the commitment to women’s political education showed that leading socialist women such as Clara Zetkin were committed to building a movement of educated, skilled women, who were well-versed in socialist theory and able to speak confidently and contribute assertively to debate.

What is often seen as one issue — referred to at the time as the “woman question” — actually developed quite differently amongst women of different classes.

Women of the new capitalist class had a sharp experience of sexist discrimination, living alongside men of their own class who had achieved many of the political, educational and economic rights that they were still, as women, denied. These were women who did not share all the privileges of aristocratic women; but who (unlike working-class women) saw all the discrimination they faced originating from their sex, not their class.

The bourgeois women’s movement came together as a loose federation in the League of German Women’s Associations (Bund Deutsche Frauenvereine), founded in 1894. Its radical wing, represented in the 1890s by the ‘left liberal’ Women’s Welfare Association (Verein Frauenwohl) wanted to work with the socialist women.

Working-class women and socialist politics

Socialists disagreed about whether to work with the bourgeois women’s movement. Clara Zetkin opposed cross-class collaboration, and this view predominated amongst the socialist women.

Why? Socialists believed that women’s oppression was rooted in class structure. Capitalism has a drive to exploit labour as cheaply as possible, and a trend to shift production to the factory whilst social reproduction (taking care of workers, rearing children) remains within the home. Capitalism had not invented women’s oppression, but had made its own “woman question” from sexual oppression inherited from previous class societies.

At the founding congress of the Second International in 1889, Clara Zetkin argued that under capitalism, woman was enslaved to man, as the worker was to capital. Economic independence would enable working-class women to play their part in class struggle, but without pressing the struggle forward to socialism, this would only replace slavery to a man with slavery to an employer. So the key to achieving women’s emancipation was a fundamental change in property relations -

production had to be owned and controlled collectively, the household economy socialised to free women from the domestic burden. The socialist programme for women's liberation had to be a programme for the abolition of class society.

Zetkin's stance was also influenced by the Marxist argument for working-class political independence. As socialism had to be an act of self-emancipation, the working class could rely only on itself. However progressive a section of the capitalist class may be, it would still defend its own interests by defending capitalism.

Unless it acts independently, the working class is likely to be politically dominated by any section of the ruling class with which it collaborates. Eleanor Marx argued that "whenever working women meet together with bourgeois, it is the former who come under the influence of the latter".

On different sides

In 1896, Clara Zetkin presented the report on the 'woman question' to SPD congress. The bourgeois women's movement, she argued, was engaged in a struggle against the men of its own class. Working-class women, on the other hand, were fighting alongside working-class men for socialism.

For Zetkin, working-class women's interests lay in overthrowing class society. The interests of women of the capitalist class, though, lay in preserving class divisions, albeit in a less sexist form. Working-class women were fighting a class struggle, and bourgeois women were on the other side.

A simplistic reading of this argument might infer that Zetkin exonerated working-class men from any part in oppressing women. But she recognised and fiercely opposed the sexist behaviour of working-class - and some socialist - men. Neither did she believe that only working-class women suffered oppression as women.

Zetkin's critics have argued that her policy led to missed opportunities. They urged co-operation with bourgeois feminists in, for example, the 1896 garment workers' strike.

Some bourgeois women did genuinely support the strikers' demands. But their agenda was that of 'social reformers': they wanted to improve the lot of the most exploited workers in order to dampen class conflict. But socialist women sought to heighten the strikers' class consciousness. How could they inspire working women to fight against capitalism if they were in alliance with a section of their exploiters?

With women who supported the wage-slavery system under which they were exploited?

Protective legislation

On one major issue of class interests and of the real living conditions of working women, the bourgeois and socialist women took opposing stances. The SPD proposed several measures for legislation to protect women workers — for example, barring women's work around the time of childbirth. Even "progressive" bourgeois parties, such as the Centre Party, failed to support them.

Bourgeois feminists wanted the law to be "sex-blind", not to interfere in women's "right to work". They believed that working was better than not working because it freed women from domestic slavery. However, for working-class women, industrial labour was not a means of "getting out of the house" but an economic necessity — they needed to earn wages in order to survive. Neither did it necessarily free women from domestic slavery — usually, it just added to it.

The bourgeois women's attitude flowed from a privileged class position. They were not economically conscripted into the sort of dangerous, exhausting, unpleasant, unrewarding jobs that working-class women were. Their main concern was to escape boredom and frustration, rather than financial survival.

For socialists, women's entry into the industrial workforce was progressive, but full emancipation had to mean more than being exploited in the same conditions as male workers. The appalling condition in which many women worked, including during pregnancy, did not represent liberation: it represented suffering and enslavement at the hands of capitalism.

Even where socialist and bourgeois women agreed on demands, their respective priorities were very different. The SPD women called for various measures concerning women at work — the need for female factory inspectors; equal pay for equal work; the abolition of the system of domestic servants. There were further demands relating to women as mothers — support for women absent from work after childbirth; and removal of discrimination against unmarried mothers and their children.

Bourgeois feminists concentrated forcefully on "equal rights" issues, such as property rights. Before 1908, German law held that a woman needed her husband's permission to work outside the home; that she had to turn over to him all her property and income; and that she was under the legal guardianship of her father, then her husband.

“Equal rights”

Engels argued that for the working class, the demand for “equal rights” had two possible meanings. It could be an expression of outrage at social inequality, and thus an articulation of revolutionary instinct. And it could be a means to mobilise people to demand the equality which capitalism promises, but only socialism can deliver. He concluded that “In both cases the real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the demand for the abolition of classes.”

Engels warned that if it is not understood in this class context, “equal rights” becomes an illusion, even a prejudice.

The socialist women were committed to ending class exploitation, private ownership, and all forms of inequality. The bourgeois feminists may have advocated women’s equality, but they defended the class system which condemned millions of women to exploitation and oppression. It is hard to imagine an easy co-operation between socialist women and a movement which shared no other aspect of their political beliefs or aspirations.

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